

NARMADA

State and the People

Styles of Suppression and Resistance

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For the Narmada Bachao Andolan and similar resistance movements, the August happenings - all of which involved the different levels of confrontation between the movement's leaders, the state's strong arm and the bureaucracy - ought to prompt some reflection over their future course.

FOUR Narmada-related incidents which took place in August deserve a close look and interpretation. Even the broad details pertaining to these incidents were ignored in many quarters of the media, and therefore require some narration. A distinct sense of boredom has surfaced in the media in relation to Narmada affairs, and indeed to a certain extent, in relation to all resistance movements concerned with ecological problems. The boredom is undoubtedly an outcome of the emerging consensus among owners of industry and the media, that popular ecological awareness is detrimental to speedy industrial growth. Killing of news relating to people's opposition to destructive development projects or legal battles waged as part of such opposition has become routine. A third party to join this consensus among industry and media owners are political leaders. They were never too keen on supporting ecological struggles, except when an immediate political advantage was at stake. Even this variety of interest has dwindled in high-level political circles since the advent of World Bank-directed economic reforms.

This is why the prime minister's meeting with the 500 people from the Sardar Sarovar region and Narmada Bachao Andolan leaders on August 2 was a notable and pleasant surprise. Soon after the rise of United Front to power in the centre, environment magazine *Down to Earth* (June 30) had commented that prime minister Deve Gowda was no friend of ecological struggles. The Narmada issue, of course, does not relate to the environment alone; it also relates to the immediate destiny of whole communities. The PM's level of concern for them became somewhat apparent as soon as the meeting started. He addressed the NBA leader as 'Madam Madhukar Putkar' and then announced that he had called the meeting on the advice of his colleague Indrajit Gupta. As if these signs were not enough to indicate the significance he himself attached to the

event, he added that he had a very busy schedule and that several delegations were waiting to meet him. Indeed, the men and women assembled to hear him on the Narmada issue could see other delegations on distant patches of the vast, lush lawn. These men and women had travelled all the way to New Delhi from what is one of the most different and isolated terrains in inhabited India. No PM or senior politician has personally experienced what it means to commute in and from this region in the monsoon season.

The PM promised to minimise displacement and misery before making an unexpected and welcome announcement. He said he would convene a meeting lasting two to three hours where the four concerned chief ministers, NBA leader Medha Patkar (named as earlier) and 15 to 20 people from among the dam-affected population (five from each state) would be invited. On some insistence by Medha Patkar for an early and specific date, the social welfare minister announced even as the PM was leaving that the latter had decided to hold the meeting on August 16. This was by any standards an exciting development in the decade-long drama of state deafness over Narmada projects. The four CMs had met in July at the PM's own initiative, and no one had then even considered inviting the NBA, let alone the dam-affected people. Residents of the Sardar Sarovar region had come to Delhi precisely to protest against the so-called 'resolution' reached in the July meeting. However, the surprise and the satisfaction arising from the PM's new wisdom - 'I will be in a position to say what to do next' after the proposed meeting, he said - did not last long. Gujarat CM Suresh Mehta reacted to the PM's plan by saying that he would not attend any meeting where Medha Patkar was present. Soon thereafter, the PM's office conveyed postponement of the August 16 meeting to the NBA, without mentioning a new date. This is how the first incident concluded.

The second occurred in Ahmedabad on August 17. Medha Patkar had gone there to hold a press conference. She wanted to appraise the Gujarat press about the outcome of the most recent hearing of the Narmada case in the Supreme Court at which the court had refused to remove the stay on further construction of the Sardar Sarovar dam granted more than-one-and-half years ago. Sections of the Gujarat press had carried false and occasionally vicious items or; the NBA's stand. Medha Patkar's idea of holding a press conference to clear the air could not materialise. The house of Gujarati writer Ashwini Bhatt where she was staying was surrounded by slogan-shouting BJP activists and the police who said nothing to the crowd but arrested Medha Patkar. She was first taken to a police station outside the city, then to Godhra, and finally dropped, after the full-day confinement in the back of the police jeep, in Baroda at night. That ended the second incident.

The third and fourth incidents occurred near the site of the Bargi dam in Madhya Pradesh. In contrast to the Gujarat government, the MP government has maintained an NBA-friendly face over the last little while, despite its own terrible record in rehabilitation at Bargi. The government's media-management has so far helped Bargi evade the bad name it deserves in common knowledge about displacement misery. Disappearance of people, repeated deceit by the government, and a routine 'yes-but' attitude on the part of officials have been salient features of the Bargi story. As in previous years, a 'dharna' was organised at Bijasen village of Seoni district during this monsoon. The immediate demand was that the government should not fill the Bargi reservoir beyond 418 metres above sea level so that the submergence land could be used for cultivation. The government was determined to raise the water level to 422 metres. On August 18, talks between Seoni's administrators and the people suddenly broke down and a severe lathi-charge began. Neither women nor children were spared. A statement signed by 13 victims of the lathi-charge notes that the district collector personally participated in it. The state's chief secretary's submission to the national human rights commission says that the police resorted to the lathi-charge when the people threw stones and sticks. How, and how many, stones and sticks could have been found in a piece of cultivable land with a strip of water already approaching is one of the many little details worth wondering about.

Next day, Medha Patkar joined the dharna demanding an inquiry into the lathi-charge

and release of the people arrested, in addition to the demand concerning water level. On the morning of August 20 she was arrested and taken to Rookhad for solitary confinement in a forest guest house which has no telephone link. Her statement about the mode of arrest and a photograph of the moment of arrest reveal the cold vulgarity with which the Seoni police dealt with her. When told that she was to be arrested, she expressed her wish to be heard first, but the police simply dragged her away through the slush even as her glasses broke and shoes got left behind. The photograph shows her being pushed towards a boat by four women constables, themselves surrounded by more than 20 policemen. The condition of her clothes and hair shows the amount of physical force applied on her. Even while she was seated on the boat, she was pressed hard from behind. In a telephone conversation, the chief secretary of MP, reputed to be a sympathiser of the NBA and an admirer of Medha Patkar, told me with certainty that she was arrested because she would have committed suicide by drowning, and furthermore that it was necessary to keep her under arrest as she would try the same thing if she were to be released. She was eventually released 10 days later following an order from the Jabalpur High Court which held her arrest on August 20 to be illegal. By then, the water level had reached the level of 422 metres. Following Medha Patkar's arrest, many more people were arrested, some at a point when they would not have survived the rising waters. Finally, after the high court's order of Patkar's release, negotiations were held between the NBA and the government. All those arrested were to be unconditionally released and an independent inquiry was to be made into the lathi-charge. As for the water level, December 15 was fixed as the date for bringing down the reservoir to 418 metres. The provincial media were supporting the government's stand all along. The only pressure the government was under was that of hundreds of individuals and environmental organisations both in India and abroad, including Greenpeace, who expressed outrage over the Bargi drama.

The four incidents outlined here offer us an opportunity to reflect on the functioning of the state and the problems of a people's movement. Political leadership and the bureaucracy have been working in cleverly designed distant ways which permit the former to look friendly towards people's resistance while the latter ensure the determined pursuit of the plans that people are opposing. This division of labour is, of course, not new, but its implications are getting harder for the political leadership to sustain. With a pro-people image to protect, the UP government must find it discomfiting to have its PM look

accommodative to a BJP chief minister while the real reason for the PM's change of mind lay in bureaucratic advice. We can see in this miniature graphic of our times a solid denial of the claim frequently made that the bureaucracy is losing power or ground. If owners of industry and their friends in the construction business ever needed help, its most trustworthy source would surely remain in the bureaucracy. Although its historical character and origins are well known, this faceless, rule-quoting class has not even begun to be understood by scholars of Indian state and society.

What happened in MP was another example of the division of labour between the bureaucracy and the political leadership. When the chief minister of MP was shown the photograph of Medha Patkar's arrest at a press conference in Delhi, all he said was that the chief secretary had great respect for her (*The Hindu*, August 28), suggesting that the CM could not be blamed for what happened at Bargi. The lathi-charge, the arrests and confinement, and the subsequent negotiations notwithstanding, the state government accomplished what it wanted to as far as filling of the reservoir was concerned.

For the NBA and similar resistance movements, the August happenings ought to bring a disturbing thought and an occasion to reflect on it. The conversion of NBA's best known leader into a symbol is a phenomenon which has been crystallising for some time now. Resistance being the central theme of the movement, the thought of a certain life-span in its momentum cannot be avoided, nor can one expect that the terrible demands life has made on its full-time leadership would not cause depletion of inner resources. The NBA itself has become a symbol of rational scepticism towards the socio-political and economic formation that 'national development' has

assumed. NBA's experience has become a consolidated resource for anyone interested in making a truly objective study of the ideology of developmentalism. The grounds on which the NBA has opposed the Sardar Sarovar project are supreme examples of substantive rationality which few in India, even among scholars, have learnt to distinguish from the instrumentalist rationality practised by the state in the name of development. And the Narmada struggle has opened up strikingly new points of enquiry into modernity, particularly into the structures of domination associated with modernisation in post-colonial conditions. It is a simplistic perception projected by many observers, that the Narmada movement represents preservationist traditionalism. The implications of the movement for many areas of civic life, particularly the areas that verge on basic needs and fundamental values, are deep and inviting. To have opened up an attractive vista for future course of social action and theorising is no small achievement. The conversion of NBA leader Medha Patkar into a symbolic entity forecloses precisely this course. For one thing, both she and the NBA become more vulnerable to state manipulation, and not just to state violence. The record of her August journey from one brute suppression to the next tells us that popular resistance becomes a lot easier to deal with when it congeals around a definite symbolic figure. Not a few people's movements and many more voluntary groupings have suffered on this kind of road. The NBA has had a distinct identity among India's ecological movements because it had a strong base among the masses, built over time with laboriously organised popular education. Just because the state has proved deaf and the intelligentsia callous, the programme does not need to turn on itself.

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